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Town and Country

From Green Fields to the Grey Town
by MARK C. HENRIE

Lessons from the English Countryside
by ALLAN CARLSON

JEFFREY CAIN on the Charter of the New Urbanism

Who Owns America?

H. LEE CHEEK on Agrarianism and Cultural Renewal
JEREMY BEER on the New Agrarians

In Search of America on a Human Scale

RYAN STREETER on Putnam's *Bowling Alone*
Tobiaz Lanz on *Fugitive Theory*

The Open Road

JAMES V. SCHALL, S.J. on Travel

The Edmund Burke Newsletter

DEO VOLENTE LABOR PROFICIT

Reviewed by H. Lee Cheek, Jr.



AGRARIANISM AND CULTURAL RENEWAL

WHO OWNS AMERICA?

edited by Herbert Agar and Allen Tate

with a new foreword by Edward S. Shapiro.

ISI Books (Wilmington, DE),

450 pp., \$24.95 cloth, 1999.

WHO OWNS AMERICA? is a collection of essays in social criticism first published in 1936. Appearing during the volatile interwar period, it was the explicit sequel to *I'll Take My Stand*, the classic indictment of centralizing industrial society written by "Twelve Southerners." *Who Owns America?* is historically important because it brought together diverse voices from outside the South, including England, to buttress the Southerners' critique.

This powerful combination of the best Southern Agrarian social critics with some of the brightest lights of English-speaking Catholic localists—known popularly as Distributists, and including in this volume Douglas Jerrold and Hilaire Belloc—resulted in virtually a new school of thought. The contributors argued at a very sophisticated level for the recovery of what had been lost by years of war and centralizing industrialism: a humane social order. Their intellectual experiment was shattered by World War II. However, the themes addressed by this group of writers, assembled by the poet-critic Allen Tate and Herbert Agar, G. K. Chesterton's chief American disciple, are perennial and timely, the sort of combination that makes for a "classic." The republication of *Who Owns America?* is therefore an event of great importance.

The new edition is also powerfully augmented by an authoritative new foreword by Edward S. Shapiro, a scholar who has distinguished himself as

one of the most able students of twentieth-century American religious and political history. If the Agrarian and Distributist insights contained in *Who Owns America?* can help us better comprehend the limits of the Leviathan state, then it is appropriate that we attempt to recover the teachings of this volume.

For the contributors to *Who Owns America?*, a community organized around agriculture and small-scale production provided a more wholesome environment for families and workers than industrialism could ever offer. An agrarian society encouraged a life more conducive to religious and ethical living as well. The experience of tilling the soil and harvesting crops embodied a sense of self-sacrifice and an attachment to a shared community. Farming was by its very nature a communal, rather than a solitary act. The primary aesthetic and spiritual needs of humankind were best fulfilled by the structure and corporate nature of an agrarian society as well. Andrew Lytle's prophetic contribution to the volume makes just such a suggestion: "Agriculture is a limited term. A better one is farming. It is inclusive. Unlike any other occupation, farming is, or should be, a way of life."

Genuine cultural renewal could not take place without appreciating the agrarian worldview—grounded in a connection to the soil and a love for the Creator that was increasingly less evident in the generation born at the end of the nineteenth century. At the beginning of twenty-first century even the memory of such an existence is quickly fading.

Many of the contributors traced the roots of the modern problem to a peculiar dynamic in American historical development. The growth of New England from the first Massachusetts Bay settlement, and subsequent religious and political developments in American life, had crowded out the agrarian or pastoral alternative from the public mind. The "American" religious and social experience, as well as the resulting vision for politics, became identified with Puritan New England alone. The late Sydney Ahlstrom argued that the "Puritan Ethic" of legalistic moral strictures and a doctrine of labor as serving and pleasing God, had become *the* American ethic. In the hands of the Puritan divines, this "ethic" became incorporated into an understanding of politics, nourishing New England religious and political thought and influencing the Founding generation by fostering an understanding of the uniqueness of the American political experience.

The consummation of the New England ethic was the development of a civil theology founded on the special status of the American regime—and indeed, a particular understanding of the nature of that regime. America/New England was regarded as the "New Israel," expressing similarity with the Biblical and historical narrative modes of expression. America's situation in the pantheon of world religious and political history was understood as unequalled. The regime was special, a providential gift offered to the world, a

city on a hill, a light amidst the darkness of political despotism. The transcendent aspects of American civil theology served a rememorative purpose, providing a basis for appreciating the generosity of the Divine while also looking to the future.

As the Southerners writing in *Who Owns America?* asserted, this was only half, and the less important half, of the story. Commencing with the earliest movement of American religious and political thought, an important bifurcation in the conceptualization of an ideal social order can be observed. The Puritans were *not* the first and prototypical Americans. Their story was not the story of the *whole* nation. Their legalist-rationalist mode of thought, with its attraction to the machine and the factory, could not be considered the only "American" mind.

For outside New England, there arose a less dogmatic and more explicitly pastoral presentation of the virtues of the life of the New World—one that we might associate with the other great colonial settlement, Jamestown. The Virginia colony, nearly simultaneous in date of origin with Massachusetts Bay, shared a related history and many aspects of political development, while also exhibiting distinctiveness. The inheritors of this other American tradition had to have a hearing if America was to avoid a slide into industrial despotism. At the end of the day, preserving an organic regionalism was, as Donald Davidson argues in *Who Owns America?*, the "principle" that could maintain a stable polity and secure liberty.

The Agrarian and Distributist traditions in America (and, as *Who Owns America?* demonstrates, Britain as well) produced a very different understanding of what was really most important to the good life lived in common. Against the tendency to endorse a theocratic and unitary form of life, the political vision of the Agrarians and Distributists accommodated divergent theological and political understandings of order and sought to nurture an ecumenism grounded in the acceptance of dissent and a diffusion of political power.

This alternative vision was in a way more fully "political." Liberty was conceived in terms of its corporateness, a *societas*, combining the family and larger units of an interconnected citizenry formed into associations. Instead of the rigorous moral codes found in New England, the Southern colonies looked more to the English model of ecclesiastical and civil subsidiarity, relying on representatives nearest the situation to provide order and preside over the adjudication of disputes. In essence, the religious and political developments within the South were founded on a spirit of localism in both theory and practice. The movement towards "establishing" state-sponsored churches, for example, met with great success in New England, while in the South a decentralized theory of control and the habit of localism in matters of church and state insured a greater

autonomy and forbearance among the associations of the faithful and governing authorities. Throughout the nineteenth century, the North viewed the South as a land "that dwelt in darkness." Like missionary schoolmarms, Northerners would bring light to these gentiles. In *I'll Take My Stand*, however, the Agrarians insisted that the South had something to teach the North. And with the diverse contributors to *Who Owns America?*, it was clear that Southern ideals had a "cosmopolitan" (as it were) appeal.

As the late Mel Bradford argued, the Southern "spirit" looked to Eden after the Fall as a model, with "the best of the gifts of this life," and anticipated that a fruitful social and political existence was possible only when "pursued with prudence, energy, honor, and regard for a wise prescription."

The implantation of the "garden" as a metaphor for explaining how the Southern understanding differed from the New England version deserves our attention. Contrary to the New England understanding of rational precision in all religious, political, and economic arrangements, the Agrarian-Distributist worldview identified the ancient imperfections of a civilization with the need for an enduring pattern of improvement and refinement within human nature. A society grounded upon the rock of such a prescriptive development was less likely to be consumed by ideological deformations of their understanding. Conversely, such a society was also more reluctant to submit to a reformation of defects in the pre-existing worldview inherited from previous generations. Distant and overbearing sources of ecclesial and political authority were not easily accepted and were viewed with skepticism.

In the long struggle within the development of an Agrarian-Distributist worldview, a distinct version of the American regime was articulated, a vision incompatible with the New England presentation. Yet the Southern vision shared with the Northern one the original American constitutional design for the diffusion of political authority. From the colonial period we can witness the beginning of two divergent understandings of the reality of religion and politics, prompting the historian Nathan Hatch to suggest that at some point in this development, in the two great regions one "could draw upon precious few common traditions in defining their Americanness."

The contributors to *Who Owns America?* ultimately affirmed a vision of a moral regime founded upon the idea of subsidiarity in political and religious concerns. Subsidiarity as a means of dividing public authority and political power and of perpetuating the republic was dependent on the virtue of the citizenry within the states. While some critics have argued that a localist vision lacks any coherent notion of virtue, virtue was in fact of great importance to the Agrarians' and Distributists' understanding of religious and political order. The inculcation of virtue required a

sustained effort to allow each generation to hear the "voice of tradition," Patrick Henry had urged. If the witnesses expired without fulfilling the need to "inform posterity," social and political life might suffer the consequences of such a collective loss of memory and purpose.

Even though the Agrarians and Distributists were an assortment of representatives with many theoretical and geographical differences, they were united by an unwillingness to accept consolidationist measures, regardless of the form, and insistent upon protecting a decentralized, group-oriented society. They cannot be adequately fathomed by simply noting their negative response to particular issues; on the contrary, the contributors to *Who Owns America?* were part of a clear republican understanding of the nature of the American regime and of religious experience.

For the contributors to *Who Owns America?* the overwhelming practical and theoretical inheritance was established upon an appreciation of the necessary limitations of social and political life. Primary among the means of limitation was the need for societal and personal restraint when faced with the possibility of radical transformation. While change and social mobility were not the most commonly acknowledged aspects of an agrarian society, neither were such considerations beyond the pale of possibility. But the industrial society brought into being by liberal capitalism held the promise, and the threat, of limitless and ever radicalizing change. *Who Owns America?* presented an Aristotelian mean as the basis for installing an element of restraint in the operation of government and economy.

Living within a society aware of its constraints, the contributors also appreciated the limits of human experience, acknowledging the shortcomings of their own perspectives and holding utopian schemes in disdain. The South had lost its struggle due in part to a separation of its religion from its politics. In fact, Allen Tate rightly noted that tradition alone, devoid of the impact of religion, tends to be a tradition of violence rather than of spiritual empowerment.

Today, the Agrarian-Distributist devotion to preserving an inherited way of life stands as a remarkable testimony for the rising generation. At a time when efforts to "create" *ex nihilo* a false sense of community are widespread, it is time to revisit the Agrarian-Distributist defense of an older, organic, and humane social order. And to appreciate the Agrarian-Distributist *fatum*, we must remember their love of the Creator and his creation, amidst our current confusion.

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